

## The Clipper Visits... Dr. Timothy O'Farrell

By CHRIS PECK



Dr. Timothy O'Farrell

Dr. Timothy O'Farrell says he has found a way to reduce domestic violence and the number of divorces in marriages involving alcoholics.

Project CALM (Counseling for Alcoholics' Marriages) has combined alcohol counseling — a commitment to stay sober — with couples counseling and has achieved good results. O'Farrell is the project director.

Offered at the Veterans Medical Center in Brockton and West Roxbury, CALM is a joint effort of the center's Alcohol and Drug Treatment Program and the Harvard Medical School of Psychiatry.

"The couples therapy is how we got started," O'Farrell said. "But we learned early on that we would have to address the alcoholism head on." One did not work for very long without the other, he said.

O'Farrell, an associate professor of psychology with the Harvard Medical School who lives in Duxbury, said he also found alcoholism was usually the culprit in the couple's marital problems rather than the other way

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around.

"The old story is that she drove me to drink. It's much more likely in my experience that the alcoholism is the problem. It has a life of its own and it affects the individual and everyone around him," O'Farrell said.

CALM began in 1978 and is the culmination of 18 years of research and work with clients. Three years ago it was redefined "based on the best of everything we learned up until then," he said.

"What we know is that with the program we now have, for people who come and complete it, 90 percent do very well in terms of staying sober and getting along better with their spouse. They are less likely to divorce," according to O'Farrell.

"We had good sobriety rates and the families survive," he said. "We know they do better than if the alcoholic were treated alone."

In Project CALM, alcoholics and their spouses attend weekly outpatient therapy for 4 to 6 months. First, couples establish a "sobriety contract" and receive an in-depth evaluation of their drinking and marriage problems.

Then, they attend a 10-week couples therapy group. Group sessions consist of 4 to 5 couples, and meet in the evening. After the group is over, all couples are contacted regularly for 24 months to keep track of their progress.

"Domestic violence is very much reduced for people who go into a program like this and the health care costs for treating alcoholics in hospitals or other facilities go down. Those savings more than pay for the program 5 times over for the first year," according to O'Farrell.

The next step is for CALM researchers to determine why only some alcoholics achieve long term results from the therapy and to study whether even short term results would be different if the alcoholic in the relationship were female or a minority. Because O'Farrell's work has been with the VA Medical Center, his clients have been mostly male, he explained. But the program has been expanded to 2, non-veteran satellite facilities, Metro West in Natick and ADCARE Hospital in Worcester.

O'Farrell said, although there is a 90 percent success rate the first year, by 2 to 3 years that figure is reduced to 50 to 60 percent because people suffer relapses.

His current program is seeking a way to identify who would not get long term results, even ahead of time to see if the therapy could be adjusted.

Project CALM serves 2 purposes. It provides information for continued research to help married couples when a spouse is an alcoholic and it, also

provides the therapy. It is funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholics.

When it began, it was one of the first programs in the country to involve alcoholics with their spouse in therapy.

CALM has attained national visibility as the subject of many research and professional articles and a new book by O'Farrell, *Treating Alcohol Problems: Marital and Family Intervention*.

It has also drawn visitors from around the U.S. and from such distant places as Australia and Russia.

O'Farrell encourages people in these alcoholic family situations to get help. He can be reached at Project CALM (508) 583-4500.

Five tips O'Farrell offers for spouses of alcoholics to help avoid the worst problems:

- 1) Avoid violence. Don't argue with someone who is intoxicated, no matter how angry you are or how justified you are, if you know it is likely to lead to heightened violence.

- 2) Get help early for yourself if the alcoholic is unable to or unwilling. Find out what your options are.

- 3) Look for windows of motivation with an alcoholic, when they are upset about their drug use. That is a good time to bring up the option of a program like CALM.

- 4) If you are living in a family situation with an alcoholic and decide to stay within the marriage, you can minimize the damage to the children by minimizing the amount of arguing and conflict they observe.

- 5) Try to maintain those family routines, regular dinner times, vacations and Christmas. Those are the sort of pleasures that seem to be associated with kids who have less emotional problems resulting from alcoholism in the family. These are things to build cohesion.

Although O'Farrell's project CALM is done mostly with veterans, he says he would be glad to refer any calls for help to the right source.